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C O N F I D E N T I A L PANAMA 000616

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 07/25/2018
TAGS: PGOV PREL KJUS PM
SUBJECT: PANAMA: RAUL RODRIGUEZ TO BE NEW ASSEMBLY
PRESIDENT

Classified By: Classified by POLCOUNS Brian R. Naranjo for reasons 1.4
(b) and (d)

SUMMARY

¶11. (C) President Martin Torrijos has chosen Raul Rodriguez to be the new President of the National Assembly, replacing Pedro Miguel Gonzalez (PMG) who is under federal indictment in connection with the 1992 murder of a U.S. serviceman. Sources from both the ruling Democratic Revolutionary Party (PRD) and leading opposition party (Panamenista party) have shared this information in recent days. END SUMMARY

PMG Out, Rodriguez in

¶12. (C) PRD majority leader and National Assembly Deputy Leandro Avila told POLOFF on July 24 that President Torrijos had called Raul Rodriguez on July 23 to give him the news of his selection. According to Avila, this decision was made in conjunction with leading Presidential candidate Balbina Herrera, who was close to current National Assembly President, Pedro Miguel Gonzalez (PMG). (NOTE: PMG is under indictment in the United States in connection with the 1992 murder of a U.S. soldier). Avila said that although Herrera remained close to PMG, her relationship with the U.S. was of great importance and she did not want PMG to be an obstacle to strengthening that relationship. Also, Herrera was also keeping at a distance PRD National Assembly Deputy Hector Aleman, a strong supporter of PMG's candidacy for Assembly President and frequent critic of the U.S.

¶13. (C) Panamenista National Assembly Deputy Alcibiades Vasquez confirmed this story in a conversation with POLOFF on July 25. Vasquez characterized it as an order directly from Torrijos.

¶14. (U) Raul Rodriguez is a National Assembly Deputy in his first term, who has worked at the Electoral Tribunal. He has previously served as Vice-president of the Assembly (NOTE: Although Assembly sessions run for five years, leadership is elected yearly.) The PRD caucus in the National Assembly will meet in the coming weeks to formally select its candidate to be the chamber's president. Controlling 45 of the chamber's 75 seats, it is a foregone conclusion that whomever the PRD caucus chooses will be the next President of the National Assembly.

COMMENT

¶5. (C) PMG is widely perceived by the political class in Panama to be the reason that the U.S. has not yet ratified the Free Trade Agreement (FTA). He will continue to have a role in politics as a member of the PRD's National Executive Committee (CEN). Although Herrera, the leading Presidential candidate from the ruling PRD, is putting distance between herself and PMG during the political season, they remain close. In stepping aside, PMG is fulfilling the commitment he made in a letter to Torrijos in May to not run for re-election. END COMMENT

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